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Interview of Jordan T. Watkins

Jordan Watkins 00:00

Routledge reached out and said, ‘We have this series, and we want a couple of volumes dealing with religion and slavery in the 19th century. Would you be interested in editing a couple of volumes?’ And I did some looking and realized that there weren’t really any volumes dealing with slavery and religion. There are plenty of documentary editions dealing with religion, and there are plenty of documentary editions dealing with slavery, but there aren’t really any documentary editions focused on slavery and religion.

Samuel Hurwitz 00:38

[Intro music fades in] Historian and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the past they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. Jordan Watkins is an assistant professor in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University, and a recipient of the Marc Friedlaender Fellowship from the MHS. I sat down with Jordan to learn more about him and his research.

Jordan Watkins 01:14

I am from Alpine, Utah. I am an assistant professor at Brigham Young University, and I am currently researching for a documentary edition on slavery and religion in the 19th century.

Samuel Hurwitz 01:30

Can you tell us about what drew you to history in the first place?

Jordan Watkins 01:35

Sure. Well, speaking of religion, I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and grew up as a Latter-Day Saint. And really my faith is what drove my interest in history. And when I say history, I mean that in a very sort of limited sense. It drove my interest in my own

tradition, trying to learn more about my tradition, and because my tradition is relatively newer, having its birth in early 19th century, there's plenty of documents available to sort of try and understand the origins of that tradition, right? So initially, it was just that interest in learning more about the origins of my faith, but as I've thought about it more, I think it's actually there's something about my faith tradition that has a particular orientation towards the past, so an interest in documents, an interest in records. So, the Book of Mormon a text that claims to be right historical. It's a tradition that's about restoration, right, which implies this relationship to the past. This wasn't conscious when I was younger, but now, as I think back about it, I think my tradition actually has this orientation towards the past, and perhaps that was part of what was driving some of my interest in history. Now that was a pretty surface level interest in the past, and one that tended to be very sort of rose-colored view of history, but over time, that came to be a deeper interest in Latter-Day Saint history as an object of study, rather than something that was simply an object of devotion.

Jordan Watkins 03:25

There were people who cultivated this interest within me, and then, as a an undergrad and then a grad student, I came to take a more critical approach to the history of my own tradition. Somebody who was crucial in that development was Richard Bushman, Latter-Day Saint historian, who wrote a biography of Joseph Smith. So, founder of the Latter-Day Saint faith. And he sort of helped me in that transition away from kind of that more juvenile approach to history, including my own history, into a more kind of mature approach to what it means to be a historian and to try and understand the past and to recognize that the past can be this foreign country, right? I think my understanding is a when I was younger, was I always approached my past as very familiar as something that I almost I could gain ready access to, and then I kind of came to understand, well, actually, there's much about it that is foreign. So, I do think that my interest in history began with trying to understand more about my own faith, and assuming that that faith could sort of unlock the mysteries of the universe, and then moving to an understanding of well, history is about granting the otherness of past peoples and then really trying to come to understand them on their own terms.

Samuel Hurwitz 03:26

How would you say that growing up in the church has given you any particular advantages or really beneficial insights into history that someone who didn't grow up in your circumstances wouldn't necessarily have?

Jordan Watkins 05:11

So Latter-Day Saints have this belief that there's a belief in ordinances, things like or sacraments, things like baptism, right, which you would find in other Christian traditions. Latter-Day Saints, in Joseph Smith's theology, there's this understanding that one can perform those sorts of ordinances or sacraments in behalf of people who have have died. So, something like what is called baptism for the dead. That's an interesting topic in and of itself, and raises all kinds of questions and concerns, perhaps, but even that is suggestive of a particular orientation towards the past, that there's something about how I relate to people in the past that is necessary, that I am meant to be thinking about people in the past. I am meant to be considering sort of their salvation and what I can do for them. I think what that can produce in a historian is a real concern and care for historical peoples, whether or not I, as a Latter-Day Saint, am performing baptism for somebody in the past. I think that kind of sentiment can lead me to a kind of sympathetic approach to historical people because I believe that there's an actual connection, or at least the possibility of a connection, between myself in the 21st century and someone who lived in the 19th or the fourth century.

Samuel Hurwitz 06:52

I got asked did you go on your mission trip?

Jordan Watkins 06:54

I did. I served in central Mexico.

Samuel Hurwitz 06:57

What was that like?

Jordan Watkins 06:58

It was a fascinating experience. Very eye opening. Did about two months of language training and preparation, which was not at all sufficient, and then showed up in central Mexico, and my first we call them companions, you're in twosomes. And my companion was from Mexico, and I didn't understand the language. Didn't really know what I was doing as a 19-year-old, and so that was quite a learning process. And over time, figured out the language and figured out a new culture. I've been talking a little bit about moving from a familiar to a foreign approach to the past and the mission experience, of course, was me figuring out how to understand a new culture and a new language, which is not unlike what it is to do historical work, right, to try and understand people who lived in a very different time and place. In this case, it's just a very different place, right? But like with historical work, you start with this sense of otherness and foreignness, but then you work towards, at least in some cases, you work towards a kind of familiarity, right, where you recognize the humanness of all people. And so, what once felt very foreign starts to feel more familiar, right? So, yeah, it was a very hard, but also in many ways, beautiful experience.

Samuel Hurwitz 08:35

Can you tell us about the sources that the Massachusetts Historical Society has? What do you hope to uncover from looking at these sources?

Jordan Watkins 08:43

I've been fortunate enough to do research here a couple of times. The MHS was absolutely crucial to the research for my first book, Slavery and Sacred Texts. And at that time, I was looking through papers like the papers of Theodore Parker. This time, my focus has been a little different because of the project. Let me say first that I find catalogues to be in particular for this project, very important. Of course, one shows up to the archive wanting to look at sources that are at the archive. But catalogues can also be crucial. So, for example, I've been looking at subject headings like slavery in the church or slavery in the Bible, and then just going through each of those sources. And in many cases, these are printed sources, and I actually can find them online somewhere.

Somebody has digitized them. So that's sort of a side effect of being in an archive, is using the catalog, it can point you to other kinds of sources. I'll give you an example of this abolitionist, Frances [Ellen] Watkins, who we share the last name, but I don't, I don't think or otherwise related, she fairly recently, I found this out while I was here, fairly recently, her first book was uncovered, published in 1851. People known about it, no one had ever found it until a couple of years ago. And in that book called Forest Leaves, she has a poem called, 'Bible Defense of Slavery.' And now I could have found that, I suppose, in some other way, but it's really through use of the catalog and then following sort of a rabbit hole. That's how I found this particular poem. So, I suppose I'm saying like, yes, being in the archive, I'm hoping to read sources in the archive that are only available there, but I find that the archive actually also leads me in other directions.

Jordan Watkins 10:45

But I'll give you some examples of some of the other other sources I've been looking at. So, this project is primarily, maybe solely, will feature printed sources, though I haven't made that decision yet. So, I've been looking at a lot of pamphlets. And these include a lot of printed sermons, printed sermons in which the minister gets up. This is most of these sources 1830s but especially '40s and '50s. And often begins with a kind of caveat, and says, "Today I'm going to speak on the topic of or the subject of slavery," and then provides either some kind of excuse or justification or explanation for why he is going to be addressing that topic, which I find interesting. There are many, many of these sermons, and yet they, almost all of them, have the minister saying something like that to begin, which tells you right, that for many people, they were uncomfortable about this kind of sermon. But one of these sermons is from an individual named George Bassett. He was congregationalist minister, and he gives this sermon in Washington, D.C. in 1858, and there's some of the familiar arguments you would see here, but one of the things that surprised me is he makes the contention that if people show that the Bible supports slavery, then that's a strike against the Bible. That's a rare position to take in 19th century America. It's actually an argument that Theodore Parker had developed earlier, and I was surprised to find it showing up here in a Congregationalist church in Washington, D.C. That's more rare. Most of the sermons that I read are individuals taking an anti-slavery, a pro-slavery approach, and using the Bible to to support their

position. That is the vast majority of sermons that I've seen you have individuals cherry picking, proof texting, using particular passages of Scripture to provide their argument, either for or against slavery. So many of these sources are sermons given in Massachusetts. I did find some given outside of Massachusetts, such as the one I've just mentioned in these collections there are some southern sources, but far fewer. I suspect that's because of where we're at, the Massachusetts Historical Society, but I think that's also because anti-slavery individuals are much more likely to want to talk about slavery than pro-slavery individuals, right? You get the gag rule in Congress suppressing or aiming to suppress, the reading of anti-slavery pamphlets, or you get the burning of abolitionists or perceived to be abolitionist materials in the south, right? So, it's not surprising that most of these sources are northern sources, and many of them are New England sources.

Jordan Watkins 13:53

Just to highlight that point about ministers feeling like they have to justify themselves in talking about slavery, I did find a couple of manuscript sources related to this topic. One is a letter written in 1852 by a young woman to her mother. She describes attending a church meeting. This is in Massachusetts, and she voices her disgust at a minister who in before the meeting begins, brings in a black congregant to sit next to her, and she says how she was disgusted by this. And then she describes that the minister gave what she calls a scorching, Free Soil sermon, and she hated it. And then she returned, that this is a on a Sunday, she returned that evening for another sermon. I'm not quite sure if it was the same minister, but it was a more traditional sermon, and she loved it.

Highlighting that point that for many people, they didn't want to hear about the topic of slavery, and they felt that it was political, that it was not something that should be addressed over the pulpit. So that was nice to see that. I mean, problematic, no doubt, but nice to see sort of a confirmation of, okay, this is why these ministers are having to stand up and say, 'Listen, I know you don't want essentially, I know you don't want me to talk about slavery. But here's why I'm going to do that.' I think maybe I should also mention one of the things that I was a little bit surprised about in the sources is so Quakers are known to be anti-slavery from fairly early on, and there's a long tradition of anti-slavery agitation amongst Quakers. So, I was a little bit surprised to find that a couple of sources, in some ways, challenge that narrative a little bit. So, one is an 1843 decision amongst this

is Quakers in Indiana, who decided to separate themselves from what was called the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends, because these individuals believed that the yearly meeting had accommodated themselves too much to pro-slavery views. So, this is a set of Quakers saying we are separating ourselves from you because you are not anti-slavery enough essentially. Then there was a subsequent 1845 letter written by a group of Quakers in Pennsylvania to other members of their faith, saying you have departed from anti-slavery sentiment and anti-slavery action. So, I found those sources to be quite interesting. One other I'll mention is in 1839 you get a meeting of a group of and based on the source, it appears to be a group of individuals from a variety of denominations, and I know that one of them is a Quaker, and they get together and they say, 'We want to form a new church that is explicitly anti-slavery.' They felt like their own denominations were not anti-slavery enough. This is a step beyond there's a movement called Come-outerism, where some individuals are saying, you have to come out from your church, or you have to come out from a political party because they're not anti-slavery enough. Well, this is kind of a next step to say, not only do we want to come out, but we actually want to create, in this case, a new church that would be explicitly anti-slavery. Now I haven't followed up on that. I don't know if they actually succeeded in creating a new church or what the nature of that church would be. But there's just a, of course, a wealth of materials and sources on this topic, and, of course, on many other topics.

Samuel Hurwitz 17:34

What have been some of the challenges or unexpected finds that you've encountered here at MHS?

Jordan Watkins 17:40

One of the unexpected things I keep finding, I had found this before, so what I'm finding are sermons or addresses in which individuals, most of these are anti-slavery. Sources are saying that listen, the biblical argument in favor of slavery is very similar to a biblical argument that could be made in favor of polygamy. And I've seen this before because I've looked for it before in some of the work that I've done on Latter-Day Saints, but I've been surprised at just how often that shows up. It's not usually the focus of the argument, but it frequently shows up, which becomes quite interesting in the 1840s especially the 1850s when people do know about Latter-Day Saints

practicing polygamy, of course, this becomes part of the Republican Party platform in 1856 where slavery and polygamy are described as the twin relics of barbarism, but it shows up in a lot of sermons and addresses before that, more frequently than I had assumed. I do remember reading one source in which the individual said, lots of people are very critical of polygamy and the problem of those Mormons out in the west, and yet he says, but we're not concerned about the more problematic polygamy that exists in slavery, as he describes it. The ways in which that conversation about polygamy was wrapped up in conversations about slavery was something that I found quite interesting, something else that I didn't know much about that was a little bit surprising to me. So, they're something called the American Tract Society, and they published primarily religious tracts on a whole variety of topics. So, the American Tract Society is not unlike the American Bible Society. The idea is to publish religious tracts and disseminate them. But they take the position, this is in New York, they take the position that they are not going to address the issue of slavery, that that is seen as ancillary to their primary goal of spreading the good news of the Gospel, and so they will not address the topic of slavery. Well, New England has a Tract Society, and they readily publish anti-slavery pamphlets. In fact, it might be the, I think it is called the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Society. So that's their express purpose. Well, in the late 1850s Boston, there's a source in which members of the American Tract Society in Boston decide to separate themselves from the New York Tract Society, or the American Tract Society in New York, and for the reason that they are unwilling to publish on the topic of slavery, and this Boston American Tract Society says, 'We are going to publish tracts that address this topic directly.' And then you start to see a number of publications on the topic of slavery by the American Tract Society in Boston. This actually showed up in a letter that I read a June 1858 letter written by Henry Augustus Hart to Jonathan Quincy Barton. He talks about a number of things. He talks about pro-slavery readings of the Bible. And then he notes that the American Tract Society of New York is failing to address this issue, and so the Boston American Tract Society is going to start doing that. So, these sort of institutional, organizational, in some cases denominational, concerns and questions about how to address or not to address slavery, that is something that, of course, a number of people have written about, but showed up in the research more than I suspected it would.

Samuel Hurwitz 21:41

What drew you to this particular topic?

Jordan Watkins 21:45

Well, this one's a little bit different, because it came via invitation. So, Routledge reached out and said, 'We have this series, and we want a couple of volumes dealing with religion and slavery in the 19th century. Would you be interested in editing a couple of volumes?' And I did some looking and realized that there weren't really any volumes dealing with slavery and religion. There are plenty of documentary editions dealing with religion, and there are plenty of documentary editions dealing with slavery, but there aren't really any documentary editions focused on slavery and religion. So, I thought, well, I think there is a need for these kinds of volumes. So, after convincing, which didn't take much convincing, but I found a co-editor, Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh could work on a volume dealing with religion amongst enslaved people. And after that, decided, okay, we can go forward with this. So, so yeah, a little bit of a different project, in the sense that its initiation was by invitation.

Samuel Hurwitz 23:01

How do you think your research will help us better understand the past? Why is it relevant today?

Jordan Watkins 23:06

I guess sort of an obvious answer would be, well, you know, there are still religious people, and the ways in which religious people in the past lived, talked, interacted with each other, probably has something to say about how religious people in the present do the same, and of course, with the issue of slavery, or still dealing with the after lives of slavery, right? But I think another thing that this research shows, one is that the 19th century is filled with individuals who were religious. It shows the centrality of a particular kind of religion, at least in much of the research that I've seen, and that is Protestantism, and even more than that of Biblicism. So, this idea that the Bible is the way that we answer these kinds of questions that should be the way. Now, of course, there are a variety of other religions and approaches to religion. In fact, I think one of the things that my

colleague's volume will do is sort of challenge that sense of religion as Protestantism, because she's going to be dealing with religion amongst enslaved peoples. So, it'll highlight the ways in which often Protestantism was sort of seen as a given that is religion. But her volume, I think, will show that well, that's always under construction, right? But what I would say so, in some ways, the sources I've seen, it shows the the force of of a particular kind of Biblicist Protestantism, and to some extent, sort of the limits then of sort of what can and cannot be argued. But at the same time, there's a wide variety of approaches to the topic of slavery, from people who claim to hold similar religious beliefs. So, although there are, there are constraints or limits for many of these people as to how they can address this issue. Nonetheless, within those constraints and limits, they find creative but also very distinct ways of doing so. I guess what I would say is that this can help us too to think about, think about our own thinking, to recognize that we exist in context in a particular time and place, and to be more aware of our own assumptions. So, I'll give you an example of this from one of the sources I've read. This is a sermon by a man named Edmund Wilson delivered a sermon in Salem, [Massachusetts]. This is a few days after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. He speaks of those who tended to downplay the evil of slavery, and he said things like this, 'When men speak lightly of the evil of slavery or the good of freedom, it is other men's slavery or freedom that they mean, never their own.'

Jordan Watkins 26:04

He then goes on to speak about prejudice. He says, 'Slavery has been the parent of one of the most cruel prejudices that ever perverted and abused the hearts of men.' He said that this prejudice, or racism, is 'as bad as slavery. It is the same thing as slavery.' And then he added, 'It will take generations to abolish the effects of slavery when slavery is done away.' I thought that was kind of a striking statement that he made. He speaks with insight and understanding, and yet in the same sermon, you can see some of his prejudices, some of his racism. He speaks in paternalistic ways about black people. So, I think a source like that helps us map the limits and possibilities of 19th century thought, and it can ask us to consider as much as we can, sort of the limits and possibilities of our own thinking.

Samuel Hurwitz 27:02

So, what are the most challenging issues that you face as a historian?

Jordan Watkins 27:08

So, historians, of course, are people, right? So, we live our lives like anyone else, and this, this topic is a bit of a harder topic, but on the brink of becoming a historian days before taking my weeks before taking my qualifying exams for my PhD, my youngest sister, Micah, died by suicide. Of course, in that moment, I wasn't thinking about school. I was, of course, thrust into deep shock and mourning, and when the thought of school came around again, because I did have those qualifying exams hanging over my head, I thought that maybe I couldn't do it. Maybe this would prematurely end my career as a historian just when it was about to get started. But now, as I think about it, in hindsight, I'm realizing that one of the ways in which I approach my sister's death was as a historian. And what I mean by that is I immediately was wanting to understand my sister more deeply, understand her pain, and the best way that I knew how to do that was by reading remainders that she had left. She had written a number of journals. She died when she was 17. The journals that she kept covered some of her pre-teen and then teenage years. And as I pored over those journals, I did feel like I was coming to know something more about my sister and her experience. So, I think my sort of training as a historian up to that point was perhaps part of what pushed me in that direction. But I also think that experience has helped me in my work as a historian, one by helping me confront hard things and then trying to muster as much humanity as I can in approaching the past, in recognizing here was someone who was as much of a contemporary as I could possibly have, who, in an instant had become historical, and of course, I was going to approach her and the record she left with great care and a desire to understand. And I think that doesn't always but sometimes informs my approach to the past, that these are people that I don't know, but they are people, and so as I approach these documents dealing with hard topics, I can do so with care and with understanding.

Samuel Hurwitz 29:55

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Historians is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Jordan Watkins of Brigham Young University. I've been Sam Hurwitz Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. See our show notes for details and thank you for listening.